SAFECOM

Background on Public Safety and Wireless Communications

Inadequate and unreliable wireless communications have been issues plaguing public safety organizations for decades. In many cases, agencies cannot perform their mission-critical duties. These agencies are unable to share vital voice or data information via radio with other jurisdictions in day-to-day operations and in emergency response to incidents including acts of terrorism and natural disasters.

According to a report published by the National Task Force on Interoperability (February 2003), the public safety community has identified the following key issues that hamper public safety wireless communications:

- Incompatible and aging communications equipment
- Limited and fragmented radio spectrum
- Limited and fragmented budget cycles and funding
- Limited equipment standards
- Limited and fragmented planning and coordination

In short, the Nation is heavily invested in an existing infrastructure that is largely incompatible. The SAFECOM Program was established by the Office of Management & Budget and approved by the President's Management Council to address the public safety communications issues identified above.

The SAFECOM Program

SAFECOM, a communications program of the Department of Homeland Security's Office for Interoperability and Compatibility (OIC), works with its federal partners to provide research, development, testing, evaluation, guidance, tools, and templates on communications-related issues to local, state, and federal public safety agencies. OIC is managed by the Science and Technology Directorate's Office of Systems Engineering and Development.

SAFECOM, a public safety practitioner-driven program, is working with existing federal communications initiatives and key public safety stakeholders to address the need for better technologies and processes for the cross-jurisdictional and multi-disciplinary coordination of existing systems and future networks. SAFECOM harnesses diverse federal resources in service of the public safety community. The scope of this community is broad, including more than 60,000 local and state public safety agencies and organizations. Federal customers include agencies engaged in public safety disciplines such as law enforcement, firefighting, public health, and disaster recovery, as well as federal agencies that provide funding and support to state and local public safety agencies. SAFECOM makes it possible for the public safety community to leverage resources by promoting coordination and cooperation across all levels of government.

SAFECOM's Near-Term Initiatives

- Develop a process to advance standards that improve public safety communications interoperability
- Develop and disseminate grant guidance for all agencies providing grants for public safety communications and interoperability
- Provide tools and models for communications and interoperability training and technical assistance
- Create a one-stop shop for public safety communications and interoperability
- Develop, test, and evaluate technologies for public safety communications and interoperability

SAFECOM'S Long-Term Goals

- Achieve a systems-of-systems environment supported by communications standards, tools, and best practices
- Facilitate coordination of funding assistance through tailored grant guidance to maximize limited resources available for public safety communications and interoperability
- Pilot tools and methods as national models for public safety at the rural, urban, state, and/or regional levels
- Provide policy recommendations to promote efficiency in public safety communications